

# Archival and Manuscript Materials at the NPS

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Archival and manuscript collections are accumulations of documents with a common creator or collector. Any information recorded in a tangible form may be an archival document including such materials as architectural drawings, archeological field notes, audiotapes, correspondence, diaries, electronic records, ethnographic records, graphic prints, manuscripts, motion picture films, natural and cultural history resource management records, natural history field notes, photographs, reports, and videotapes. The National Park Service manages archival and manuscript collections as part of the park museum collections since they have permanent value as park resources. Making up over 41% of NPS museum collections, archival and manuscript collections document changes to parks over time, serving as a site's memory.

## Who Uses Archives?

Park archeologists, ethnographers, historians, interpreters, managers, and scientists use these audio-visual, electronic, and textual materials as baseline data for cultural and natural resource management activities. Park staff and outside researchers also use archival and manuscript materials for research, exhibitions, and publications such as administrative histories.

These archival and manuscript collections include **acquired materials** created by individuals and organizations original to the park sites or related to park-topical interests as well as park-produced **cultural and natural resource management records**.

Acquired archival materials, such as the papers of Thomas Edison or Frederick Law Olmsted, provide historical evidence related to the site. Without these acquired archives, the historical significance of the site would be diminished; therefore, they are **integral parts of a park's resource base as well as being resources in their own right**. Frequently original to the park site, these collections provide the historical source material for exhibitions, interpretation, reference, and understanding the site's significance. These collections convey the park's history in many voices from the personal papers of the individuals whose life the park celebrates to those of individuals and organizations that existed on or near the park site over the years.

The resource management records created by the park staff are the baseline data used in studying, interpreting, and managing NPS cultural and natural resources. Important resources in their own right, these park-created collections are essential for discipline-related studies such as anthropology, archeology, botany, cultural landscapes, entomology, geology, historic architecture, history, mammology, and paleobiology. Without both kinds of archival and manuscript collections, the NPS's ability

to manage its resources and document the history and significance of the parks, as well as the people and events which shaped them, would be lost.

## How are Archival and Manuscript Collections Different from Other Research Materials?

Although the collection may also be related by subject matter, by document type, or by the creating entity (e.g., individual, family, or organization), an archival collection has a shared creator or collector. An archival collection accumulated by a single individual, family, or organization may contain items, such as letters or photographs, created by many different people.

Therefore, in archives the principle of "provenance" is used, rather than authorship. Provenance is defined as the entity (e.g., individual, family, or organization) that created or accumulated the collection, as well as the collection's history of ownership. In applying the principle of provenance, archivists do not mix or interfile collections from separate sources.

A single archival collection consists not only of the audio-visual, electronic, and textual documents, and their history of ownership, but also the original order in which the various materials have been placed. Most archival collections have an internal arrangement or order. This order was either imposed by the collection creator when the collection was produced or imposed by the individual who assembled the materials. This internal order, called "original order," is critical to the collection's interpretation and use.

The collection's original order provides physical evidence of the creator's actions, relationships, and work patterns. Preserving the collection's original order significantly enriches the value of the collection for researchers. The position of the document in the file often indicates who saw it, who modified it, who used it, and when. Archival research is often the only way to discover, "What did he know and when did he know it?"

Archival and manuscript collections may be as small as two items or as large as many million items. Larger collections are often correspondingly diverse in the documents they contain and complex in their levels of arrangement. Archivists use the concept of "series" to identify and manage documents within complex collections. A series is a natural grouping of documents arranged or maintained as a unit within a file system because of the shared circumstances of creation, receipt, format, or use.

## What Do Archivists Do?

Archivists seek to provide physical and intellectual control of the collections for which they are responsible by evaluating, collecting, preserving, arranging, describing, and providing reference service. Physical control refers to managing the rehousing, environment, and security of the documents. Intellectual control refers to managing the informational content of the documents so that necessary materials may be located for reference and research.

The Curatorial Services Division is currently working with park and regional staff to locate non-current audio-visual, electronic, and textual records in the parks. NPS

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parks contain museum archival collections both created and acquired by NPS staff. As described in the *Departmental Manual* (“Museum Property Management,” Part 411, 1/8/93) and NPS-28, *Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, there are several categories of archival and manuscript collections found within the parks, including active and inactive official federal records and non-official records.

### The National Archives and the National Park Service

Referred to as “records” by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the NPS *Records Management Guidelines*, official records are defined as the original documents created and received in the course of performing the daily work of the NPS, including audit records, budgets, central park correspondence files, contracting records, financial records, law enforcement records, legal records, museum records (e.g., accession, loan, catalog, and inventory records), permits, personnel records, and so forth. These records are produced to meet a federal requirement of tracking or record-keeping.

Official records are managed according to the *Records Management Guideline*, NPS-19. With the exception of permanent records (such as museum records), official records are said to have a “life cycle” through which they pass—from active daily use in the offices, to inactive storage with access available for reference, to disposition.

Disposition of inactive official records can include any of several actions—such as destruction, transfer to another agency, or official transfer to a Federal Records Center (FRC) or to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)—depending upon the requirements of NPS-19. Official records may be transferred to low-cost FRC storage facilities for a period in order to determine their potential value for reference, research, legal requirements, or fiscal purposes.

These official records—with a few exceptions—are not essential to the management of park resources. After they are no longer needed for current use, the disposition is determined by the park records manager according to NPS-19. Under no circumstances may official records be added to the park’s museum or library collections.

The original copy of an official federal record is the “record” copy, while other copies, duplicates, or variant records (which the National Archives does not collect) may be called “sub-official,” “non-official,” or “non-record copies.” Official federal records are managed using NPS-19, and the services of NARA and the Federal Records Centers (FRC). **By law, NARA has responsibility for the official records of the federal government.**

NARA operates the FRCs, which provide free storage and access to inactive official government records awaiting destruction or transfer to NARA. Until transferred or destroyed, these official records remain under the control of the originating agency (NPS) and the FRC must contact the NPS before initiating destruction or transfer procedures. Note: The FRC is not an appropriate place to store non-official records such as resource management collections.

Museum records—such as accession, catalog, loan, and inventory records—are maintained permanently in the

park for use in controlling museum objects. Other official federal records that have not been identified for permanent retention in the parks but which are needed for current business must be appraised through NPS-19. As necessary, these active records are certified by the Archivist of the United States (NARA) for long-term retention in the park. After official federal records are judged to no longer be needed for current use, they must be disposed of by the park’s records manager in accordance with the records schedule provided in NPS-19.

Because NPS museum archival and manuscript collections are **made or acquired for reference or exhibition purposes, they are non-official records** (i.e., non-record materials) as defined by NARA (44 USC 3301).

Most original archival materials that remain permanently in the parks are non-official records either created outside of the NPS—such as the archives of an association—or generated during the course of conducting business, but not qualifying as official federal records—such as reference collections of copy or duplicate documents. Thus, both the Thomas Edison papers and the field notes of a park archeologist are non-official records (i.e., non-record materials).

Non-official records that were created for reference or exhibition are museum property if they fit the park’s Scope of Collection Statement and the park’s archival appraisal criteria. For purposes of control, publications that are rare or original to the site are also managed as museum property, although they may also be cataloged in the library system.

### Park Staff and Museum Archival and Manuscript Collections

As materials are discovered by park museum staff in warehouses, attics, basements, and offices they are surveyed to determine their contents and status under NPS-19. If the materials are official records, such as personnel, permit-granting, law-enforcement, audit-related, legal, or financial records, as defined by NPS-19 and NPS-28, the museum staff remind the records manager of the need to determine their disposition, such as eventual transfer to a FRC.

The curator cares for the park’s non-official collections by first assembling all existing collections documentation in order to get an overview of the various collections. The curator then physically surveys the potential non-official archival holdings of the museum on a collection-by-collection basis. The survey gathers information on the collection’s title, dates, provenance, subject matter, size, document types, arrangement, restrictions, and condition. This survey may be completed as part of a Collection Management Plan (CMP).

Once the survey is completed, a collection-level survey record is produced describing what the curator discovered about the collection. This record includes the collection title, dates, provenance, size, document formats and processes, subject matter, arrangement, restrictions, and preservation state. The preliminary collection-level record provides essential information which may be useful for the creation of a preservation problem list, the ordering list for supplies, a collection-level record, and the collection evaluation for appraisal.

The next step, the collection appraisal or evaluation, determines if the park will keep the collection based upon NPS-19, the park's Scope of Collection Statement, whether the collection is site-related or not, and whether it has intellectual, artifactual, evidential, monetary, associational, or other values.

If accepted into the museum collection, archival and manuscript accessions must first be accessioned and then factored into all park planning and management documentation. The collection is then stabilized by basic cleaning and rehousing in archival storage such as acid-free folders and boxes. The collection's original order is carefully maintained. As the rehousing proceeds, the curator keeps notes on the collection's arrangement and any preservation or legal problems noticed such as copyright or privacy issues. The curator **does not** rearrange the collection as the rehousing proceeds. Following rehousing the collection is placed in a stable and secure environment.

During rehousing, a listing of folder headings is produced to provide intellectual access to the collection. Curators may add additional information to the original folder headings. Subject headings, inclusive dates, creator or correspondent's names, and document types may be added to the original folder titles to create a more detailed container list.

Once this folder list (i.e., container list) is produced, edited, and fact-checked, it is indexed. The indexed folder list is attached to the edited collection-level survey record for use as a preliminary finding aid. After the editing and indexing of the folder list, two steps remain to be done. First, the expanded information from the folder-list is then selectively added to the collection-level survey record, which is also edited and fact-checked. Second, the curator then catalogs the collection into the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS) using the updated collection-level record as the basis of the catalog record.

Item-level inventories or databases of all documents in a collection are produced only very rarely for particularly small or extremely valuable collections as this work is labor-intensive without providing good intellectual access to the collections. The archival approach involves providing good access to all collections at the collection-level, the series-level, and the folder-level in that order **before** attempting to provide access to any one item within a collection.

In parks whose museums contain many archival or manuscript collections, park staff prepare a brief guide to all the park's archival holdings as soon as the survey record has been edited and spell-checked and any important new information discovered about the collection during the folder-list preparation is added to the survey record. Such an indexed multi-collection guide is a major asset for researchers, as it helps identify which collections will be useful for further research.

Ultimately, it is the park curator who provides research access to the processed collections and manages them on a day-to-day basis. Curators provide the preliminary physical and intellectual access to museum archival and manuscript collections—unless there is a special restriction on the material due to donor conditions, preservation, or legal reasons such as copyright or privacy concerns.

When providing reference access, curators are responsible for implementing security, monitoring and documenting researcher use of collections, and preserving collections through the enforcement of special handling and duplication procedures. Without these policies and procedures, the documents may be stolen, damaged, or worn out from frequent use. Guidelines for carrying out these responsibilities are available in the *Museum Handbook*, Part I, Appendix J, and Part II, Appendix D.

The curator's remaining tasks are to set the priorities for collections processing and conservation and to work with regional staff to prepare a processing plan indicating the phases, products (e.g., database, finding aids), and resources needed in any final processing of the collection.

The above described steps are the basic archival activities for park curatorial staff. Beyond this work the staff will be involved in communicating their additional archival support needs for collection arrangement, conservation, and finding aid production to the regional and Washington offices so that archivists can be hired for the next, more advanced, stage of archival work, and so that funds may be programmed for future work.

### Training Needed for Archival Work

Unless the curator has received both classroom and hands-on training in archival collection arrangement, description, preservation, and finding aid production, this more advanced work should be completed only by a regional, park, or contract archivist. Parks with archival and manuscript collections must obtain training for their curators in archival work. Archival training opportunities are regularly listed on the NPS Servicewide Curatorial Bulletin Board and the Ranger Activities Morning Report. Both are on cc:Mail. The regional curator may encourage a trained park curator to undertake some archival arrangement and description work under the supervision of an archivist.

The archivist arranges and describes a collection to make a collection fully accessible to researchers. The archivist may produce a finding aid and database or park-wide name and subject index, depending on the requirements stated in the processing plan. The archivist identifies other necessary work, such as conservation, and may update the ANCS catalog record, as well as add any new documentation to the museum accession files.

Once the collection is processed and park access and usage policies and security are in place, the archivist can assist in publicizing the collection through the *National Inventory of Documentary Sources* and the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* uploading into the Research Library Information Network and the Online Computer Library Center.

NPS archival collections are the institutional memory of the National Park Service and may be significant resources in their own right. As informational resource bases, they allow us to track changes to the parks over time. With proper care, they will provide key data to park staff well into the 21st century.

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